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TAGS: [PHUM](#) [PGOV](#) [VE](#)

SUBJECT: SECOND SOLDIER DIES OF BURNS FROM FORT FIRE

Classified By: POLITICAL COUNSELOR ABELARDO A. ARIAS FOR REASONS 1.4 (B)
) AND (D)

SUMMARY

1. (C) The Attorney General's Office announced May 5 that a civilian court will take over the case of an army fort fire in Zulia State that resulted in six injuries and two deaths. On May 4, Angel Pedreanez became the second soldier to die after being severely burned in a Fort Mara confinement cell March 30. The first soldier, Orlando Bustamante, died of burn injuries April 4. (Information Minister Jesse Chacon offered his resignation April 5 after Bustamante's death, but President Chavez refused it.) Relatives of the soldiers and opponents of Chavez accused the GOV of failing to investigate the incident properly and covering up for the military. Pedreanez' parents claim that their son was murdered, while conflicting accounts of the events have become political fodder for both GOV opponents and supporters. Investigations of the incident continue. End Summary.

CIVILIAN JURISDICTION

2. (U) The Attorney General's Office announced May 5 that a civilian court will take over the case of an army fort fire in Zulia State that resulted in six injuries and two deaths March 30. Zulia State Attorney General Mariangela Canga told reporters that she had seized records concerning one of the deceased soldiers, Angel Pedreanez, and had ordered two prosecutors to take over the investigation from the military tribunal that had been overseeing the case. Canga charged that the military tribunal had effectively frozen the investigation.

3. (U) On May 4, Venezuelan soldier Angel Pedreanez died, 35 days after he and seven other soldiers were severely injured in the army barracks fire. The eight were confined in a punishment cell on Fort Mara. Though still listed in critical condition, Pedreanez was slowly recovering and had spoken for the first time April 30 after being taken off a respirator. Hospital Director Crispin Marin told the press that Pedreanez died of cardiac arrest during reconstructive surgery. "I never said he was out of danger," Marin said. "I am very careful about such things until the patient leaves the hospital."

4. (U) Fellow soldier Orlando Bustamante died of burn injuries April 4, the same day that President Chavez mocked opposition criticism over the handling of the incident. Chavez told his audience that the soldiers had only suffered light burns. Information Minister Jesse Chacon offered his resignation at the time, saying he had misinformed the president on the severity of the soldiers' injuries, but Chavez refused it, saying he was responsible for not checking the information.

THE PLOT THICKENS

5. (U) Discussing the incident in an April 1 press interview, Gen. Carlos Briceno, Commander of the 11th Infantry Brigade, said the soldiers had been confined to the disciplinary cell for various military infractions. He also denied that the fire was anything but accidental. "The Democratic Coordinator (CD) is saying these guys were injured because their families signed the petition (against Chavez), that someone threw gasoline in the cell and burned them intentionally...they are creating false rumors." Vice President Rangel said April 2 that none of the soldiers had signed against the president, and that competent authorities had already determined that no gasoline had been used to set the fire.

6. (C) Military sources first told reporters that the fire started when one of the soldiers fell asleep while smoking. The director of army intelligence told DAO shortly after the

incident "not to believe anything in the press" about the fire, and that a full investigation is underway. Eddie Rios, a pro-GOV member of the special investigative commission

appointed by the National Assembly to look into the matter, shared a recording with the press April 2 in which two of the victims blamed Pedreanez for starting the fire by smoking in bed. Jesus Carrillo, an opposition member of the special investigative commission, asserted in an April 2 press interview that Rios reached a verdict without having fully investigated the incident. Referring to Rios' recording, Carrillo asks, "How could these soldiers who were asleep be witnesses to the moment when Pedreanez started the fire?"

17. (U) During a May 4 press conference, Pedreanez' distraught parents expressed rage and bewilderment. Claiming that their son had been murdered, they blamed the government and charged that members of the military had entered the hospital room surreptitiously and killed him. Hospital Director Marin disagreed that anyone could have entered unauthorized, saying that the hospital had maintained strict security outside Pedreanez' room.

MOD STATEMENTS

18. (U) Defense Minister Gen. Jorge Luis Garcia Carneiro pleaded with the press May 4 to refrain from speculating over the causes of the fire and deaths while the investigation continues. Garcia Carneiro also expressed condolences to the Pedreanez family, offered them full support for any action they wish to take on their son's behalf, and assured them that the armed forces would not object if they want the case placed under civilian jurisdiction. The National Assembly's Defense Commission approved a plan to reconstruct the case events, and Eddie Rios of the special investigative commission said the investigation will remain open until the cause of the fire has been determined.

COMMENT

19. (C) Defense Minister Gen. Garcia Carneiro's response to the Pedreanez family contrasts with the military's initial reaction not only to this case, but also to several other recent suspicious death cases. The military has a long history of tolerating abusive behavior among its own and then closing ranks when confronted by civilians. This strategy's short-term effect should make it easier to diminish opposition efforts to use military abuse cases as political tools. Another area of concern, however, is how the Pedreanez incident will affect Chavez' standing with the troops. After the first death, Chavez sought to blunt criticism, taking the blame upon himself and shielding his officers. He also went personally to Fort Mara to demonstrate his concern. Now that a second soldier has died, a second similar performance may not be as convincing. We do not yet have a good sense of how Chavez will handle the matter or what the repercussions will be in the military. For their part, Chavez opponents will not cease to use the Pedreanez incident to heap shame on the government.
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